Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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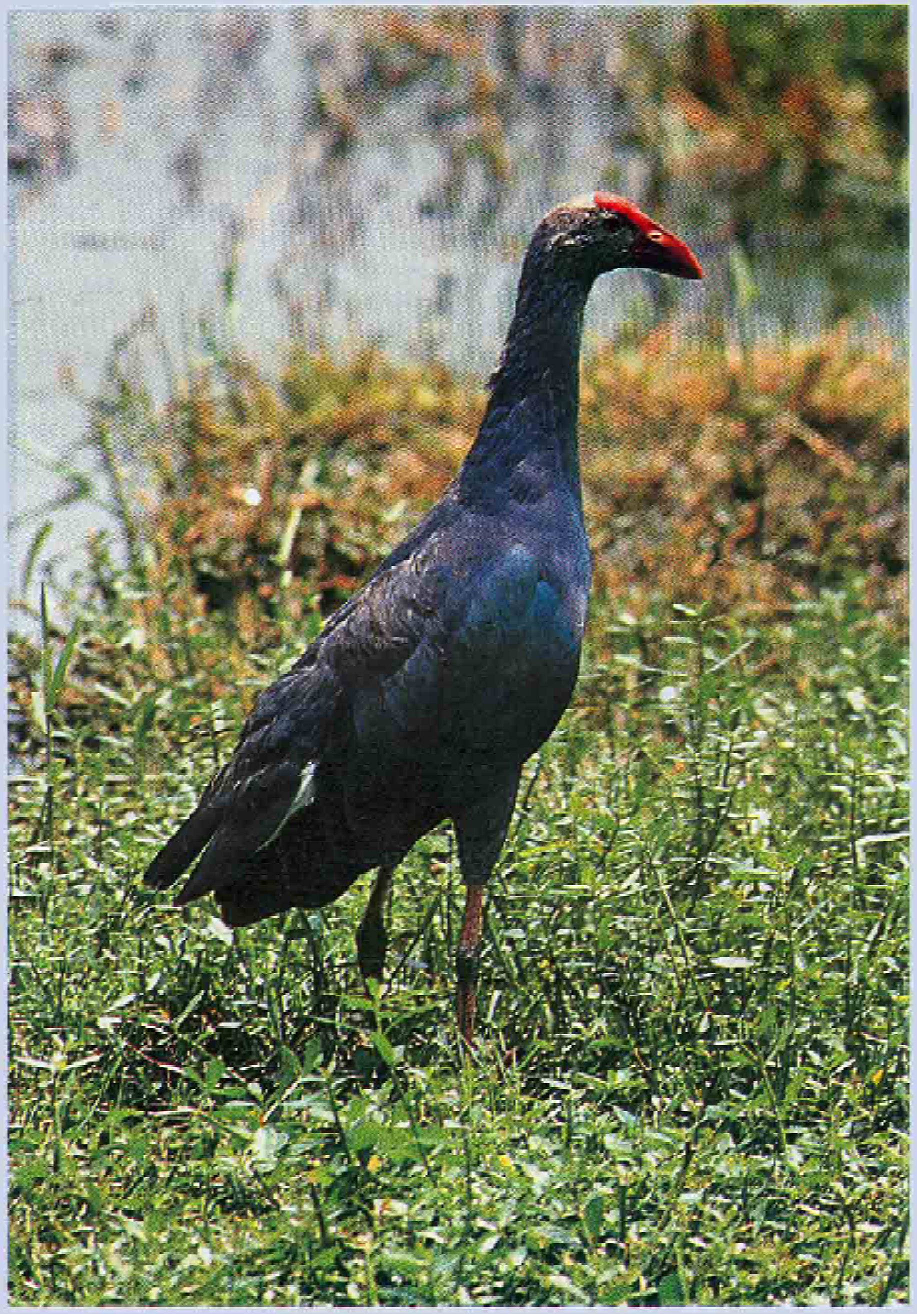

Vol. 44 No. 5 Sept. – Oct. 2004

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A Note from the Publisher

Dear Fellow Birdwatchers,

Sojourns in Sri Lanka

A decade ago Sri Lanka had witnessed the recurrent menace of insurgency that had brought much grief to a country professing wildlife conservation all along. Yet even amidst the throes of anguish and suffering in Sri Lanka, the habitat has remained relatively immune to ethnic disturbances and a reasonable degree of environmental order has prevailed.

Presently, there is no need for alarm over reports of lawlessness, which was mostly confined to the north and eastern parts of Sri Lanka in the past. A cease-fire has effectively kept the turmoil under check and today the situation is far better and brighter. We believe with good reason that the two articles by Dr. Verghese and Karmarkar are high points of their birding sojourns in Sri Lanka. We understand from the above authors that the airfare from India and lodging costs are within reach and visa formalities have been simplified. As a result of these positive developments, eco-tourism has picked up well and is all set to reach a zenith in Sri Lanka.

From the little our ancestors could understand from the jungle fowl ecology and behaviour, they were successful in domesticating the red jungle fowl, ages and ages ago. This primeval introduction to poultry farming was re-enacted by Karmarkar in Dr. Jayasundara's backyard in Sri Lanka. Today, poultry farming is not only a 50 billion dollar venture, but also a provider of vital nourishment to the global human population bordering on hunger and starvation. No small fow(u)l play indeed!. It may not be out of context to point out the fact that scientists from Europe and America are undertaking jungle fowl behavioural studies in the Asian jungles, and their inputs are being selectively used for replication in the poultry industry, to enhance current production levels. In topics concerning behaviour and ecology, the learning process has never stopped since the biblical times.

One has to notice the absence of weaver birds in the trip reports from Sri Lanka. There is a standing testimony that as elsewhere, all over Sri Lanka, the farms are dependent on chemicals and perhaps, in today's harvest practices, there is no place for the baya weaver bird; a commensal of man from pre-historic days. For centuries, weaver birds have adapted to man's agricultural practices. But, the large-scale use of pesticides and modern harvest practices are probably forcing the weaver birds to withdraw from their commensalist association with man and look for alternate means of survival.

Video session with a Passage Migrant

After an overnight of heavy rains, as I inspected the rain water harvest pipe in our garden on the morning of 23rd October 2004, a sparrow-sized bluish bird jumped forward with a sudden spurt and flew to the canopy of the Indian almond (Badam) tree. No sooner I retreated to my house to fetch my binoculars; the bird descended to the ground and energetically hopped around our garden picking up insects. As I focused my binoculars, I noticed two very bright eyes peering out at me through the undergrowth and watching me with a quizzical silent indifference. Soon the bird resumed its foraging activities in our garden and it was constantly on the move; standing on an outstretched twig for a while, flicking its tail like a redstart; spreading and jerking the tail up and down, dropping to the ground to turnover leaves and carefully probing the mulch for a fat grub or a nest of insect eggs. I sat quietly on the staircase, took a closer look at its diagnostic features and identified the bird as a male Indian blue chat *(Erithacus brunneus)*

If there was any sign of winter, it was that welcome glint in the eyes of that blue chat. It was so brilliantly coloured in blue, chestnut and black, and that handsome white supercilium, bestowed a heavenly disposition on the bird. And when it came to the spurting and hopping performance, neither the magpie robin nor the bush chat could rival the blue chat, and any garden will be glad to offer shelter to this wonderful little gymnast.

The blue chat breeds in the Himalayas and winters in south Indian forests exclusively in the evergreen patches, partial to *rubus*, *pandanus* and *calamus* brakes and the shady forest streams and dark ravines. In Bangalore it is possibly a passage migrant, transiting in October on its southbound trip and then again in April on its northbound trip. Since the early eighties, this bird has been sighted only thrice in a radius of fifty kilometers around Bangalore. In the 'forties of last the century, Dr. Salim Ali who was on an ornithological quest in the then Mysore State had encountered the blue chat on four occasions at Bababudan hills, Shettihalli, Agumbe and Biligiri Rangan Hills, respectively. Dr. Ali's trip was sponsored primarily by the Mysore Darbar and financial support was extended by the American Museum of Natural History, which had agreed to Dr. Ali's proposal that entire collection should be entrusted to Mr. Hugh Whistler for taxonomical study before disbursing the amount and they received their share. Dr. Ali had reckoned this arrangement as a distinct gain to Indian ornithology. Dr. Ali also felt greatly indebted to Whistler, who was responsible for the examination of practically every systematically obtained regional collection in India since the twenties. "Mr. Whistler's opportunities and experience in handling fresh Indian material have been unequalled and continuity can now be maintained in the excellent notes he has contributed... and as before, his constant advice and suggestions have been of considerable help in the field and I feel greatly indebted to him", Dr. Ali had remarked in his paper titled "*The Birds of Mysore*" published in the *Journal of Bombay Natural History Vol. XLIII, No 2, August 1942.*

The Blue chat had found our garden safe and trusting, especially in the company of half a dozen squirrels that were also feasting nonchalantly on the fruits of Indian almond (*Terminalia catappa*). The presence of squirrels was in a way reassuring for the chat that it was beyond the reach of a lurking cat, and that the squirrels would be the first to sound an alarm if a cat were to pass by the garden. As and when an alarm was sounded, the chat would excitedly jerk and pirouette its tail and temporarily give-up its buffet, by flying up to the Indian almond tree. Shreyas, thought it fit to video-tape this chat in our garden and he placed the camera and the tripod at vantage points and took clippings of this bird for about an hour. The bird barely batted an eyelid and allowed Shreyas to approach within five feet. For the benefit of birders who want to take a look at the blue chat that visited our garden, Shreyas has uploaded some frames of this bird, exhibiting its graceful features, on **<http://nlbw.tripod.com.>**

Happily the blue chat that visited our garden was not all that shy. May be it was its first winter and having taken birth in a remote Himalayan forest, had no occasion to come across a human being until it travelled to this part of the country. It condescended to remain with the squirrels till late in the evening and flew up to the almond tree to roost amidst the thick foliage. Before I had a chance to see it again in the morning, the blue chat had embarked on the next leg of its southbound journey, apparently flying beyond the Indian peninsula and to Sri Lanka where it wants to spend the remaining winter months.

Legends in the Making

In India, as elsewhere, nature is rich in many bizarre and unexpected events. A few river terns that are traditionally piscivorous are turning granivorous in Rajkot; a pair of Blue-rock pigeons, regarded as messengers of love and peace was seen attacking and injuring a laughing dove and emptying the contents of its nest in Jodhpur; and one treepie was discovered exhibiting cannibalistic tendencies in the Kumbhalgarh Wildlife Sanctuary.

Such eye-popping events that defy the laws of the nature and logic are happening frequently across the globe. One such episode took place recently in the jungles of West Africa, in a place called Kaminga in the Sambru province, a haven for the great cats and other predators of the African jungle. Here a lioness, which was living a solitary life, successively adopted five Oryx antelope calves within a span of one year. Saba Douglas Hamilton, the daughter of the illustrious elephant conservationist Douglas Hamilton, has recorded this enigma of nature on video tape. Habitually, the lioness was seen adopting a new born Oryx calf and looking after it with motherly affection and a strong parent-child bond was noticed in all the five instances. Ms. Hamilton could follow one particular baby Oryx that was escorted by the lioness for 16 days, without milk or nourishment, until a lurking lion ambushed the Oryx near a waterhole. The lioness was too scared to redeem the calf from the jaws of the mighty lion and the bleating calf was mercilessly smothered. The lioness continued to adopt four more Oryx calves in a similar manner, before disappearing from the Simbru province by the year end. While one calf died of starvation, two somehow escaped and rejoined their natural mothers and one was abandoned by the lioness herself. It was a very strange phenomenon that broke the rules of nature that has struck back when their worst enemy has changed for good, opined experts. Some African natives, who flocked in their hundreds to the Kaminga jungle to watch this strange association from the safety of their vehicles, remarked that the lioness was infertile and therefore god gave her a child. But one African school teacher referred to the poignant episode as "a legend in the making". We are publishing analogous reports of "legends in the making on the frontiers of ornithology" in this issue. These peculiarities, including the tobacco addiction episode (reported in the last issue) are likely to initiate a lively debate, and may at a later date persuade Grimmett, Inskipps and Kazmierczak to revise their bird books!

Bird Pollination and Teak Plantation

The earth's green cover renews and regenerates itself and sustains all living beings. If given a chance to re-establish, vegetation is known to reappear even in the most barren regions. But this cannot succeed without the agents of nature at work; both the biotic and abiotic. Examination of geographic range of certain plants reveals that there is a relation between the plants and certain bird species. In fact there is a strong correlation between them, indicating species interdependence at work. Birds as agents of pollination are crucial for the regeneration of vegetation. In this issue we are publishing the article "Bird pollinators of teak" by Drs. Nicodemus and Jacob, based on their studies at Walayar, in Palakkad district of Kerala. They have provided statistics of nine species of birds visiting teak flowers for pollination. Though these studies by themselves are welcome, we should remember the controversy over the obsession of planting monoculture saplings, such as teak and sal *(Shorea sps)* in our forests.

Before any of us jump to any conclusion or justification borne out of external factors, that teak is a pioneering tree for large scale planting as monoculture, we ought to consider some ground realities. Subsequent to the launching of the Biodiversity Act and given the popular sentiment against monoculture, one must stop viewing through the prism of commercial polarity. Certainly, one will be resorting to a straight jacket solution to the mounting ecological problems, by advocating large scale planting of teak trees that put out flowers for about two months or so in a year, attracting barely a handful of birds. Mr. S. G. Neginhal has just published “**Forest Trees of South India**”, an excellent book that describes 988 forest trees belonging to 89 families, most of which are important in forest ecology. *(See appended pamphlet)*

Teak and Sal trees that were planted in thousands of acres of forestland have gone through some turbulence in the recent past. In North India, the Sal exhibited some special symptoms of decay after losing their immunity to borer attack, and the authorities decided to chop them down, lest the epidemic spread to other areas. But contractors were not interested in harvesting borer-ridden Sal logs that had no buyers, and therefore harvested healthy Sal trees, with the connivance of local politicians and lower level forest staff. Similarly in South India, teak trees planted in their thousands in the late seventies, in the National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries, by clear-felling an existing forest. But these teak forests are slowly and steadily being axed by the timber smugglers, backed by powerful lobbies. In Karnataka, sophisticated equipments are being used inside some National Parks and Wildlife sanctuaries, to clandestinely saw off the teak trees, remove the bark, cut them to convenient rectangular planks using small generator-driven sawing machines, convert them to furniture in the adjacent villages and smuggle them out to the cities as antique furniture. In this manner both the Sal and teak have long lost their sheen and are being allowed to be milked freely for all their worth, under the very nose of a defective system. The media has time and again highlighted the nexus between some foresters and smugglers, with graphic accounts. However, even with this crystal clear picture as the backdrop, it has become exceedingly difficult to prolong this un-winnable war against smugglers of teak vis-à-vis pundits of monoculture.

Thanking you,

Yours in bird conservation
S. Sridhar
Publisher, NLBW

Bird Pollinators of Teak

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Teak (*Tectona grandis* L.f.) is one of the most celebrated timbers of the tropics. It is also the most successfully and extensively grown hardwood species in plantations. A large quantity of seed is required to raise these plantations every year but seed production is generally low in teak. Being a cross-pollinated species teak needs a good population of pollinators as vectors of pollen for optimal seed production. So far only insects, particularly bees, have been reported to be the chief pollinators (Mathew *et al.* 1987; Tangmitcharoen and Owens, 1997). Recently we found 9 species of birds feeding on nectar in teak flowers and in the process effecting pollination.

Our study site is a teak seed orchard located at Walayar, Palakkad District, Kerala State (10° 50’ N; 76° 50’ E; 500 msl; rainfall 1500 mm). A seed orchard is a plantation established with trees selected for their superior growth and timber characteristics and intensively managed for seed production. The orchard extends about 5 ha surrounded by moist deciduous vegetation and a few teak plantations. In Kerala, teak flowers from end of May to mid August coinciding with the South West monsoon. Teak flowers are small (7-8 mm), borne in large terminal inflorescences. Each inflorescence has 2000-5000 flowers and 50-100 flowers open in a day.

Table 1. Bird pollinators of teak.

Sl. No.	Common Name	Scientific Name	22.7.04	26.7.04	27.7.04	30.7.04 3.8.04 5.8.04
1	Purplerumped Sunbird	*Nectarinia zeylonica*	“	“	“	x
2	Small Sunbird	*N. minima*	“	“	“	x
3	Purple Sunbird	*N. asiatica*	“	“	“	x
4	White-eye	*Zosterops palpebrosa*	x	x	“	x
5	Thickbilled Flowerpecker	*Dicaeum agile*	x	x	“	x
6	Tickell’s Flowerpecker	*D. erythrorhynchos*	x	x	“	x
7	Plaincoloured Flowerpecker	*D. concolor*	x	x	“	x
8	Goldmantled Chloropsis	*Chloropsis cochinchinensis*	x	x	“	x
9	Indian Lorikeet	*Loriculus vernalis*	“	x	“	x

“- visited; x- not visited.

We observed Purple and Purplerumped sunbirds visiting teak trees while recording movements of insect pollinators in the orchard on 13.7.2004. On a closer look we found them feeding on nectar from the flowers and decided to make more careful observations. We checked the bird visits in the entire orchard on 20.7.2004 and observed that visits were restricted to those trees on the perimeter of the orchard only. By this time many trees in the orchard had passed their peak flowering period and received fewer number of birds than an isolated tree in full bloom standing 50 m away from the orchard. We recorded bird visits in this tree for three days (22, 26 and 27.7.2004). We could not find any bird visiting during next 3 days of observation viz. 30th

July, 3rd August and 5th August possibly due to cloudy weather and intermittent rain.

We could spot and identify 9 species comprising 3 Sunbird species Purplerumped Sunbird *(Nectarinia zeylonica)*, Purple Sunbird *(N. asiatica)* and Small Sunbird *(N. minima)*, 3 of Flowerpeckers Thickbilled Flowerpecker *(Dicaeum agile)*, Tickell's Flowerpecker *(D. erythrorhynchos)* and Plaincoloured Flowerpecker *(D. concolor)*, White-eye *(Zosterops palpebrosa)*, Goldmantled Chloropsis *(Chloropsis cochinchinensis)* and Indian Lorikeet *(Loriculus vernalis)*. We observed Sunbirds on all 3 days, Lorikeet on two days and the rest one day only (Table 1). We also spotted the Little Spiderhunter (*Arachnothera longirostris)* with its conspicuously long beak and white throat, perched on nearby Eucalyptus trees but not visiting teak flowers.

The Sunbirds were readily identified by their diagnostic features. The male Purple Sunbird was in its non-breeding plumage with a black stripe running down the middle of the breast. The female had complete yellow underparts distinguishing it from Purplerumped Sunbird with a greyish white chin and throat (Ali, 1979). The beak of both the species was found to be similar confirming the absence of the longbilled Lotens Sunbird *(N. lotenia)*. The size of the Small Sunbird was smaller than the other two species. There was no difficulty in identifying the male Purplerumped Sunbird, Flowerpeckers, White-eye, Goldmantled Chloropsis and the Lorikeet with their easy-spot distinguishing features.

In all days of our observation, feeding started between 11.30 and 12.00 hours and ended by 14.00 hours (Table 2). Interestingly the peak receptivity period of stigma for teak is reported to be between 11.00 and 13.00 hours. This is the period in which the stigma is ready to receive pollen from the pollinators with necessary nutrient secretions for the pollen to germinate (Tangmitcharoen and Owens, 1997). Although we occasionally saw a few birds perching on the tree before 11.30 hours they made no attempt to feed on the flowers. Except the Chloropsis and the Lorikeet, all birds directly perched on the inflorescence and covered 30-50 flowers before moving to the next inflorescence. They performed all kinds of 'gymnastics' and 'acrobatics' mentioned by Whistler (1949) and Ali (1979) while feeding. Holding on to the main or secondary inflorescence branches these birds covered all flowers that can be reached from that position and then changed their position to reach other flowers. They freely rotated their bodies around the axis or stretched their necks to cover the maximum number of flowers from one position. A bird covered 1-3 inflorescences per visit in 3-10 minutes. The Chloropsis and Lorikeet landed on a tertiary branch of the tree and then moved to the nearby inflorescence. They also moved on the inflorescence like the Sunbirds and Flowerpeckers, but were slower due to the body size and hence they covered less number of flowers.

The fact that birds pollinate teak flowers has significant implications on seed production and genetic improvement of this valuable species. The current focus of research to improve seed production in teak is through increasing flowering and by ensuring additional insect pollinators like honeybees in orchards. Considering the large number of visits during the peak receptivity period of stigma, birds especially the Sunbirds, should also be considered as principal pollinators of teak. Fifty visits covering 2 inflorescences per visit account for pollinating 3000 to 5000 flowers per tree in one day. We found the birds visiting only those trees in the periphery of the orchard or where there were openings due to death of neighbouring trees. This suggests that in future spacing between trees should be increased and in the existing orchards additional space should be created by removing a few trees to facilitate increased flowering on all parts of the crown and to encourage bird pollinators to visit the flowers. However, further studies are needed to understand how effective these birds are in bringing out cross-pollination between trees because an individual covers large number of flowers within the same tree before moving on to the next.

It seems the pollination services of Sunbirds and Flowerpeckers are not compensated by the reward of nectar alone. Whistler (1949) and Ali (1979) reported the role of these birds in spreading the angiosperm parasite *Loranthus*, a common and serious menace in teak plantations affecting its growth considerably. In our orchard about 25% of the trees are severely affected by the parasite reducing their seed production capacity. Sunbirds feed on nectar and Flowerpeckers on berries of *Loranthus* and thus help the parasite in fruit production and its dispersal. Since teak and its parasite plant flower at different times, competition for pollinators is avoided. *Loranthus* flowers during September-October after teak completes flowering and fruits mature by November when leaf shedding starts in teak. A leafless teak tree increases the display of *Loranthus* fruits and when seeds are dispersed, it allows sufficient light for the emerging seedlings. This is another instance of a delicate relationship between different constituents of an ecosystem, a tree, its angiosperm parasite and their pollinating and seed dispersing birds.

Table 2. Frequency of visits by teak's bird pollinators,

Time interval	No. of visits		
	22.7.04	26.7.04	27.7.04
09.30-11.30	0	0	0
11.30-12.00	33	5	14
12.00-12.30	19	11	8**
12.30-13.00	4*	7	15***
13.00-13.30	0	0	18†
13.30-14.00	0	0	13††
14.00-18.00	0	0	0
Total	56	23	68

* includes 1 Lorikeet; ** includes 4 White-eye; ***includes 5 Lorikeet and 4 Flowerpeckers; † includes 4 Lorikeet; †† includes 2 Lorikeet and 1 Goldmantled Chloropsis; rest are Sunbirds. It was difficult to score visits of different species of Sunbirds separately.

Acknowledgements

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Breeding Season of Garden Birds at Kozhikode District, Kerala

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A majority of birds in India have more or less well defined breeding seasons during which they build nests, mate, lay eggs, brood and rear their young. However, the seasons preferred by various species may vary depending on local climatic conditions and seasonal changes. In North Kerala, the most obvious and distinct seasonal change is caused by the south west monsoon which is active during June to September. However, in general, there is a progressive reduction in total rainfall and fluctuations

Table 1 Breeding season of garden birds in Kozhikode District, Kerala

Sl. No	Species*	Ali (1969)	Neelakantan (1996)	Our observation	No. of obsers.
1.	**Accipitridae** Black kite *(Milvus migrans*)	Nov to Feb	Sep to Apr	Jan to Mar, Nov	6
2.	**Phasianidae** Red spurfowl (*Galloperdix spadicea*)	Not well defined; Jan to Apr; Sep to Oct	Not mentioned	Mar	1
3.	**Charadriidae** Red-wattled lapwing (*Vanellus indicus*)	Mar to Aug	Dec onwards up to monsoon season	Mar to Apr	3
4.	**Charadriidae** Yellow-wattled lapwing (*Vanellus malabaricus*)	Mar to Aug	Dec onwards up to monsoon season	Mar to May	4
5.	**Columbidae** Blue rock pigeon (*Columba livia*)	Probably throughout the year	No particular season	Oct to Jan	6
6.	**Cuculidae** Asian koel (*Eudynamys scolopacea*)	Jan to May	Not mentioned	Mar to Apr	3
7.	**Cuculidae** Greater coucal (*Centropus sinensis*)	Undefined; Chiefly Nov to May	May to Jul	Apr to Aug	7
8.	**Capitonidae** White-cheeked barbet (*Megalaima viridis*)	Dec to Apl	Dec to Jan	Nov to Mar	8
9.	**Oriolidae** Black headed oriole (*Oriolus xanthornus*)	Mar to Jul	Mar to Aug	Feb to Mar	3
10.	**Dicruridae** Greater racket -tailed drongo (*Dicrurus paradiseus*)	Feb to May	Feb to May	Feb to Mar	3
11.	**Sturnidae** Common myna (*Acridotheres tristis*)	Jan to Aug	Not mentioned	Feb to Jul	15
12.	**Corvidae** Indian treepie (*Dendrocitta vagabunda*)	Chiefly Mar to Apr	Not mentioned	Mar	2
13.	**Corvidae** House crow (*Corvus splendens*)	Generally Feb to Apr	Throughout the year apart from heavy rainfall period; chiefly Dec to Jan	Sep to Apr	34
14.	**Corvidae** Jungle crow (*Corvus macrorhynchos*)	Apr to Jun	Throughout the year apart from heavy rainfall period; chiefly Dec to Jan	Nov to Apr	11
15.	**Irenidae** Jerdon's chloropsis (*Chloropsis cochinchinensis*)	Nov to Jun	Just before and end of monsoon	Mar to Apr	2
16.	**Pycnonotidae** Red-vented bulbul (*Pycnonotus cafer*)	Chiefly Mar to Jun	Jan to Oct	Feb to Apr	7
17.	**Pycnonotidae** Red-whiskered bulbul (*Pycnonotus jocosus*)	Chiefly Dec to May	Jan to Oct	Nov to Mar	13
18.	**Muscicapidae** White-headed babbler (*Turdoides affinis*)	Chiefly Mar to Jul	No particular season	Apr	3
19.	**Muscicapidae** Common tailorbird (*Orthotomus sutorius*)	Apr to Jun	Apr	Apr to May	3
20.	**Muscicapidae** Oriental magpie-robin (*Copsychus saularis*)	Feb to May	Summer	Mar to Apr; Jun	5
21.	**Motacillidae** Thick-billed flowerpecker (*Dicaeum agile*)	Jan to Jun	Beginning of monsoon	Mar	2

Sl. No	Species*	Ali (1969)	Neelakantan (1996)	Our observation	No. of obsers.
22.	**Motacillidae** Tickell's flowerpecker (*Dicaeum erythrorhynchos*)	Chiefly Feb to Jun	Beginning of monsoon	Mar	2
23.	**Nectariniidae** Purple-rumped sunbird (*Nectarinia zeylonica*)	Chiefly Dec to Apr	Chiefly Jan to Oct	Sep to Oct; Dec	5
24.	**Nectariniidae** Loten's sunbird (*Nectarinia lotenia*)	Chiefly Jan to Mar	Chiefly Jan to Oct	Jan, Mar	2
25.	**Peloceidae** House sparrow (*Passer domesticus*)	Throughout the year	No particular season	Jan to Apr	5

*Common and scientific names of birds are from Ali (2002)

in the date of onset of monsoon in North Kerala in recent years. Moreover, unprecedented climatic events such as drought have also occurred in this region in recent years. The most striking evidence of the effects of changes in weather are the changes in the flowering period of plants and the breeding seasons of birds and animals.

Information on the breeding season of birds in Kerala have been documented in two classical books namely, Salim Ali's Birds of Kerala (1969) and Neelakantan's Birds of Kerala (1996) and also in numerous papers that have mainly appeared in the Journal of Bombay Natural History Society and Newsletter for Birdwatchers. We have been observing garden birds in Kozhikode District in North Kerala for the past 20 years and have specifically noted their breeding activities during various months for the past 10 years (1993–2003). When we checked our notes we found that some of them were different from the periods mentioned in these two books and felt that it would be worthwhile to report them. We have not critically gone through the papers on breeding of birds that have appeared in various journals and the list gives only a general indication of the breeding periods of birds in Kozhikode District in comparison to that mentioned in these two books.

Table 2. Number of bird species observed to exhibit breeding activity during various months in Kozhikode District, Kerala

Month	No. of species
January	8
February	10
March	20
April	13
May	4
June	3
July	2
August	1
September	2
October	3
November	6
December	6

All the observations were carried out at Calicut (a bustling coastal city with garden lands towards its East) and Peruvannamuzhi (51 kms away from Calicut, at the foothills of Wynaad range of Western Ghats) in Kozhikode District. A bird was categorised to exhibit breeding behaviour when any one of the following activity was observed in them : courtship, mating, searching for nesting site, carrying nesting materials, building nest, eggs in nest, brooding over eggs, young in nest, feeding young in nest, and feeding young outside nest.

A total of 154 observations on 25 species of birds was made during the past 10 years (Table 1). From our observations it appears that February to April is a period of high breeding activity in this region with maximum activity during the month of March. Twenty species of birds showed signs of breeding activity during March among the 25 species of birds observed. Breeding activity was observed in very few species during May to October which coincides with the south west and north east monsoon periods in this region. The breeding season of birds is generally dependent on availability of sufficient food to raise their young. In North Kerala, insect activity is generally high after the monsoon periods and many plants come to flowering during this season. The number of observations made on most species of birds is low to arrive at a definite conclusion and it would be worthwhile if a systematic study is undertaken on the breeding season of birds in this region and the effect of climate on the breeding behaviour of birds.

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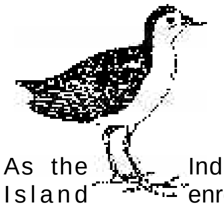

Birdwatching in Srilanka

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As the Indian Airlines carrier crossed the Mannar Island enroute to Colombo from Chennai, the terrain appeared familiar, for, southern Sri Lanka had every look of Kerala. The coconut palms, backwaters, mountains, coastlands, long beaches and the sea. I was aware of being in a familiar territory with respect to birds too. Thirty years ago when I began my birdwatching, one of the books I referred to for my local birdwatching in and around Bangalore was G.M Henry's "A Guide to the Birds of Ceylon".

The bird life of Peninsular India seemed to continue into Sri Lanka. Most of the Sri Lankan birds, especially the resident ones are also found in South India. According to Kotagama and Fernando (1994), there are 23 endemic species in Sri Lanka, of which, one species I got to see was the Sri Lankan

White-eye (*Zosterops ceylonensis*). This white-eye differs from our white-eye (*Z. palpebrosa*) The white around the eye of the Sri Lankan white-eye is distinctly incomplete whereas the white-eyes here seem to have the ring almost complete.

My Sri Lankan sojourn was for a week in early January 2004 and it took me from the Galle road in South and West of Sri Lanka through Colombo, Nettambuwa, Pasyala, Kegalle, Mawanellay, Peredeniya and Kandy, and add to these the Negombo beach.

There are at least 100 species recorded here as both vagrants and pelagic; the latter accounting for 25 per cent of the Sri Lankan avifauna. Being an island country, pelagic (oceanic birds, except when breeding) birds have to be expected. The Negombo beach on the West Coast was so 'peopled' that it was unattractive to birds. This beach is so crowded with tourists and fishermen (a main industry) that bird life is much affected. The bird that was coming a little into the land, beyond the beach, more into the back waters and lagoons, was the Gull-billed tern (*Sterna nilotica*).

My first three days of birdwatching was mainly in and around Colombo, between Wattala and Galle Road to be precise. The first bird, which caught my attention, was the Magpie robin (*Copsychus saularis*). It was found singly, but was sighted frequently, both in Colombo and Kandy. In urban and peri-urban situations, the Indian robin and Pied Bush Chat were not sighted. The Magpie robin seemed quite commensal especially in a small town near Colombo called Wattala. The next frequently sighted bird was the Spotted dove (*Streptopelia chinensis*) followed by the Red-vented bulbul (*Pycnonotus cafer*). I am not sure whether its cousin the Red-whiskered bulbul is recorded from Sri Lanka. The House crow (*Corvus splendens*) was quite common, but I did not see the Jungle crow in and around Colombo (here called as Large-billed crow) (*Corvus macrorhynchos*). But the latter was seen in the elevated hills and forests in and around Kandy. The crow is called "kaka" vernacularly, Indian linguistic influence?

The Little egrets (*Egretta garzetta*) were quite common in small ponds, while the Cattle egret (*Bubulcus ibis*) was in the open fields. The latter was not found associated with cattle. Incidentally, I was not able to see grazing or stray cattle in and around Colombo [Surprisingly, the milkman was also rare; will someone correct me?].

At higher elevation, especially near the Mahavali river, I could see the median egret (*Mesophoyx intermedia*). Its yellow and small size differentiates it from the large egret (*Casmerodius albus*). At all elevations I was able to see the Indian pond heron (*Ardeola grayii*). The vernacular name for egrets and herons is "koka".

I was able to sight the Brahminy kite (*Haliastur indus*), but not the Black kite (*Milvus migrans*), though the latter is more abundant in India. The House sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) seemed 'rare ' in Colombo, but was common in the peri-urban areas. Here the tiled houses and village-like living make it more appealing for the sparrow to commensal with man than in a built-up area. On the outskirts of Colombo there are long canals especially near Wattala where the White-breasted Waterhens are common.

I got to see some hill/forest birds, beyond the campus of Peredeniya University. I was atop a hill nearly 3000 ft. above msl. The whole place had a Ooty-like look. The forest was fairly thick and while I had my breakfast I could distinctly hear the Greater Coucal (*Centropus sinensis*) and the White-throated (breasted) Kingfisher (*Halcyon smyrnensis*). Strangely, I could not see the two birds afterwards, in spite of keeping a sharp lookout. If I had left my breakfast table midway, perhaps I could have confirmed them. But the breakfast menu of string hoppers and coconut sabol, perhaps compensated! The seven-sisters, *Turdoides affinis* (known here as Yellow-billed Babbler (=Jungle Babbler) was the only babbler I was able to see, that too on the hills. Their movement was typical; foraging in a circle within a loose territory and coming to where they started and this seemed to continue into a few cycles. Up this elevation, the Yellow Rumped Sunbird (*Nectarinia zeylonica)* was common in the company of Iora (*Aegithina tiphia*) and Ceylon white-eye.

The typical (but a lower note) coppersmith-call helped me to detect the Crimson-breasted barbet (*Megalaima haemacephala*). They were in a group of three (may be a pre-breeding phase) and certainly not as ventriloquist as in India, or so it seemed, as I was easily able to locate them.

In all ponds and water bodies, I looked out for the Coot (*Fulica atra*) which is so common in India, but could not find one. Later I learnt it is a rare bird here. However, the Little cormorant (*Phalacrocorax niger*) and Indian shag (*Phalacrocorax fuscicollis*) are common here.

Sri Lankan birds have many ecological features and species in common with Peninsular Indian birds. Joint ornithological expeditions or active interface between birdwatchers of both the countries can help to evolve mutually benefiting conservation strategies for bird diversity. In fact, the Western Ghats flora and fauna are known to have interesting similarity with the equally fascinating mountains in the Noro Lia in central Sri Lanka! It is worthwhile for us to study some interesting bird literature of Sri Lanka beginning from the erstwhile 'Ceylon'. The first publication was of Legge W. V. 1878- 1880. A History of the Birds of Ceylon, followed by Wait E.E.1931. Manual of the Birds of Ceylon, Colombo Museum.

Some of the standard publications worth referring to are:
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Finally, for the beginners and amateurs, A Field Guide to the Birds of Sri Lanka (1995) by Sarath Kotagama and Prithiviraj Fernando, is good. It however, does not give details of behaviour, nesting, call, etc. but has excellent plates and brief descriptions for a beginner to get initiated into birdwatching bug!

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A Tryst with the Sri Lankan Birds

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I had the privilege of visiting Sri Lanka twice, once for two months between November 2001 and January 2002 and again for about ten days during September 2004 at the invitation of the Sabramaguwa University for training students in parasailing. Between the training sessions and also during my travel between the campsite and my place of stay, I had ample opportunities to watch the bird diversity of Sri Lanka, which gave me the much needed ecological solace.

Unlike in India, Sri Lanka’s most conspicuous birds have so far remained insulated from pollution and deforestation. In tea estates around the hilly regions, which resemble Chikkamagalur or Sakaleshpur of Karnataka, I could even watch the Black-rumped Flame-backs, the hill-mynas, Paradise flycatchers, the Black-crested bulbuls; which is endemic to Sri Lanka and many other forest loving birds at close quarters.

The diversity of some tracks was indeed impressive. Once, a Malabar Civet Cat, which has a ringed tail and a black band running right from the top of the nose to the tip of the tail, crossed our path as we returned to the university campus at about 8 pm. On yet another occasion, I came across a dead Grizzled Giant squirrel, which was similar to our Giant Malabar squirrel with a bushy white tipped tail. The monitor lizards were sighted almost every day, some as long as six feet from the tip of their nose to the tip of the tail. In addition, it was a regular feature to notice road kills of a wide variety of Sri Lankan wildlife, in the areas adjoining the university which is located 30 kms away from the Kalluthara river. This river is referred to as the river of sorrow because of its frequent violent floods that bring recurrent misery to the people living in the flood plains in its lower reaches. One of the reasons for flooding could be the indiscriminate mining of the riverbed for gems. This area is commercially important to Sri Lanka since 80% of all gems mined in Sri Lanka, originate from the area around Kalluthara riverbed, which is called as ‘Rathnapura’ - the land of gems.

The University campus itself was a retreat for a wide variety of birds. Every day I was woken up to the soft musical calls of the golden orioles. And as I moved to the canteen to have my breakfast, the orioles were there too, but for a different purpose; to peck at their own reflections on the glass panels from outside. I could approach to within a few inches from this side of the glass, but the orioles invariably ignored me and continued to peck at their reflections on the glass. Similarly, not a day passed without the arrival hanging parrots (*Loriculus beryllinus*) in batches. The flocks usually ranged between 8 and 12 individuals. The area also abounded in the Indian coucals. However the Sri Lankan coucal which has a green bill was not encountered by me.

We conducted our parasail trainings in the open fields along the riverbed, and I could always watch a good number of birds; they included the open-billed storks, cattle egrets, little egrets, pond herons, yellow-browed bulbuls. The island is gifted with two species of white-eye, the oriental white-eye which is common in India and the slightly larger and darker Sri Lankan white-eye, which has a diagnostic incomplete ring around the eye.

My interaction with some of members of the university faculty revealed the odd fact that the Sri Lankan government has dispensed with the forest department, but in its place the department of Wildlife Conservation has assumed the dual role of protection of wildlife and the forests. The officers are trained at the Forest Research College, Dehradun, India and are posted to various provinces in Sri Lanka for the conservation purpose.

Once, I was lucky enough to spot an Indian Robin, incubating her eggs at nest. This nest had been built on a window sill of the house of Mr. Sanath Gunathilake. I craned my neck to take a good look at the nest and the bird continued to incubate her eggs, least alarmed by my overt infringement of her privacy. The Magpie Robin was yet another fairly common bird that is found close to human inhabitations in rural and urban areas alike.

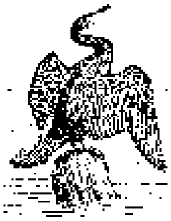
During my second visit, I had to conduct parasailing camps at a town called as Ambalan Thota in southern Sri Lanka. Here I could see flocks of peafowl foraging in a 50 acre lake bed, which had mostly dried up, save for a few puddles here and there. The peafowl were found in the company of Black -winged stilts, egrets, common sandpipers, and stints. This lake was adjacent to a canal on one side which ran for almost a kilometer in length, with lots trees. These trees were used for roosting by the pea fowl. A temple had been built by Buddhist monks, who owned the area and was therefore relatively insulated from disturbances and developmental activities. A good number of animals and birds had taken refuge in this area, which included an uncounted number of common langurs. Among aves, I noticed a significant numbers of spotted doves, golden-backed woodpeckers, purple sunbirds, Indian rollers, white-bellied drongos, tailor birds, ioras, white-breasted waterhens, Spotted munias and Black-headed munias.

Among the birds of prey, there is arguably none to match the quick reflexes of the White-bellied sea eagle, and I was a witness to my own statement, when a pair of white-bellied sea eagles effortlessly plunged one after the other, into the deep waters of a nearby lake and emerged with large fish, inescapably clasped in their respective talons. The presence of the white-bellied fishing eagle, fondly referred to as Sethodara Diyakussa by Sri Lankans, added a lucky charm to the landscape. A loose flock of about 20 yellow-wattled lapwings and half a dozen red-wattled lapwings completed the avian picture at the Ambalan Thota lake bed.

I found the country much greener and cleaner than I expected. The towns are less populated. The houses in many areas were found in the middle of the agricultural fields, with large compounds dotted with rows of trees and vegetation harboring a significant numbers of birds. The change from the town to the rural area was abrupt with vast paddy fields and greenery taking over the rural side. Around the towns hardly any garbage was noticed and littering was at its minimum. This perhaps explains the fact that fewer crows were encountered by me during my trips to the towns. It is possible that the absence of crows is encouraging a number of smaller birds to forage without fear.

The most stellar event of my visit to Sri Lanka happened at the university staff quarters. Here I had an extraordinary encounter with the national bird of Sri Lanka - the Red Jungle Fowl. Dr.

Jayasundara, a faculty at the university, who has been staying at the staff quarters for eight years, invited me to watch and photograph a bevy of jungle fowl that visit the staff quarters. I was told that the fowl visit the staff quarters every day in the afternoons, in search of tidbits and kitchen-waste that are deposited in the backyards after lunchtime. The flock is usually led by a cock that approaches the dump yard, rather cautiously. The females and sub-adults are much shy, prefering to remain under cover, till the cock gives out an all-clear signal. In order to photograph the cock and other members of his family, I hid myself with my camera in the ready, behind a window. Dr. Jayasundara had scattered a good measure of grains on the ground opposite to the window near the dump yard. The cock approached as usual and I focused my camera and released the shutter in no time. The shutter's sound and the accompanying flash startled the cock at once and he ran helter-skelter, uttering a series of scolding squeals. The cock recouped his nerves and approached the dumpyard once again. But to my relief, he ignored the shutter sound and the flash, sooner than expected, and permitted me to achieve my photographic objective. However, his consorts and the sub-adults deemed it too risky to venture into the open and they preferred to skip their lunch and remained relaxed under cover. Incidentally, my picture of the Red Jungle Fowl has adorned the front cover of the Newsletter for Birdwatchers (*Vol 43 No 2 March-April 2003*). For many Sri Lankans, the Jungle fowl is at their very hearts, carrying new life and warmth across a wide section of people and spreading the symbol of spring and awakening**.** Perhaps all can be said about them is that they are much more adaptable than their Indian cousins back in India.



Heronries around Rajkot City, Gujarat

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A study of heronries around Rajkot city was undertaken during August-2003 to January-2004. Six heronries have been studied situated near the water body except one which was formed on the tall trees of a Govt. Hospital on a road full of traffic. Initially, Respected Shri Lavkumar Khachar accompanied us when we visited this heronry. He was happy to see the big and tall trees protected by the compound, which made this heronry possible in the city. He also congratulated the officers and staff of the hospital for maintaining a traditional heronry for the last 15 years. He urged and inspired us to search for more heronries around.

We found a total of 1700 nests spread over six heronries belonging to 11 species of birds. The nesting species were 1) Painted Stork(*Mycteria leucocephala*) 2) Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus*

Sr. No.	Place	Date of Visit	Dist. From Water Body m	Tree-Nos.	Ht. m	Species and number of nests											
						PS	CE	NH	LE	LC	GC	SG	SB	PH	GH	PUH	Total
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
1	Gundawadi Hospital	9/8/03	1500	Neem-1 Asopalav-3	25 25	-	54	4	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	59
2	Jilla Garden	9/8/03	30	Asopalav -57 Borsali-2 Peltaforum-1	7 10 9	-	672	24	7	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	703
3	T.B. Hospital	13/8/03 27/9/03	40	Arudso-2 Rambaval-10 Neem-2 Peltaforum-5	25 18 15 13	-	143	21	5	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	172
4	Aji-II dam	6/9/03	100	Gorus Ambali-13 Rambaval -1 Subaval-3 Peltaforum-11	20 21 25 25	-	556	-	12	53	-	2	-	3	-	-	626
5	Nyari-I Dam-West	16/11/03 4/01/04	Mid Water	Gando Baval-Patch	4	-	-	-	-	110	-	-	16	-	1	1	132
6	Nyari-I Dam-East	26/1/04	Mid Water	Desi Baval-4	9	2	-	-	-	-	3	-	3	-	-		8

Note: 1) In column no.6, approximate height of trees is shown.
2) From Column 7 to 17 the bird species are PS-Painted Stork,CE-Cattle Egret,NH-Night Heron, LE- Little Egret, LC-Little Cormorant, GC-Great Cormorant, SG-Shag, SB-Spoon Bill, PH-Pond Heron, GH-Grey Heron, PUH-Purple Heron

ibis) 3) Night Heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) 4) Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*) 5) Little Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax niger*) 6) Great Cormorant *(Phalacrocorax carbo)* 7) Shag *(Phalacrocorax fuscicollis)* 8) Spoonbill (*Platalea leucorodia*) 9) Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*) 10) Pond Heron (*Ardeola grayii*) 11) Purple Heron (*Ardea purpurea*). On the flora side the following tree species were preferred for nesting: 1) Neem (*Azadirachta indica*) 2) Asopalav (*Polyalthia longifolia*) 3) Borsali (*Mimusops elengi*) 4) Peltophorum (*Peltophorum pterocarpum*) 5) Arudso (*Ailanthus excelsa*) 6) Rambaval (*Parkinsonia aculeata*) *7*) Gorus Ambali (*Pithecolobium dulce*) 8) Subaval (*Leucaena galuca*) 9) Gandobaval (*Prosopis chilensis*) 10) Desibaval (*Acacia nilotica*)

Birdwatchers Mr. Bhavesh Trivedi, Mr. Rajdeep Zala and Dhaivat Hathi helped me in my study of these six heronries. The details of which are shown in the table

Points Observed.

1. The monsoon in the year 2003 was good compared to the last 5 years' monsoon and all the reservoirs were full.
2. On enquiry we learnt that, 4 heronries are traditional and are in existence since the last 10-15 years. But 2 heronries at Nyari-1 dam were formed after monsoon as the peripheral trees were surrounded by water and became safe for nesting.
3. Heronries had all stages of breeding, from incubation to feeding chicks and immatures. The main threat to them was the House Crow.
4. All the nests of Night Heron were on tops of trees, using leaves of the same tree for cushioning.
5. We observed one Cattle Egret with its bill and Iris in red color an exception to breeding plumage.
6. Three heronries were formed in association with humans. In Jilla Garden, birds nested only on the trees in the central part of the garden, where human movement was rampant and on the trees on the riverbank.
7. We observed an interesting breeding behaviour of Little Cormorant. The bird brought a twig of a Neem tree from afar and sat on a tree. After some time we saw the pair mating and the female keeping that Neem twig on a branch and sitting on it.
8. Nesting of Grey Heron and Purple Heron at Nyari-I dam-West was recorded for the first time in Rajkot.
9. The nest of Purple Heron was not actually in mix heronry but it was solitarily formed on another patch of Gandobaval (*Prosopis chilensis*) a little further. We observed, through a telescope, a parent bird frequently stretching its neck skyward. Possibly the heron was protecting the nest from Indian River Terns flying overhead.

Birds in my Garden

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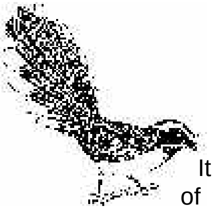

It was a Sunday morning in June. The heat of the summer had dissipated and monsoon had just begun. The sky was overcast with dark clouds. The showers came intermittently but were enough to settle the dust, clean the foliage and soak the earth. The plants that appeared shriveled few days ago had a healthier look now. Drops of rainwater rested on buds and flowers and remained suspended at the tips of leaves ready to fall on the wet earth any moment.

I was on the small sit-out located in the southeast portion of my home. This corner is half open to sky. Relishing sips of hot tea, I enjoyed the early monsoon weather and was grateful that the agony of *Greeshma* was over. A lone butterfly, probably an early riser, hovered around the blooms of Pride of Barbados. The chattering sparrows chased each other on shrubs. A female sunbird, usually seen in the garden, was yet to arrive. The greenery, sounds and smell of *Varsha* filled the air. This looked like a nice prelude to a Sunday morning when a distant musical note reached me. A few seconds later, I heard it again and hoped that the bird was moving in my direction. Sure enough, the next call was from the ashoka tree, *Saraca indica* that was close by. Shifting my chair slightly I watched and as expected noticed the dancing white-browned fantail flycatcher on a branch. Soon its mate joined in and a few minutes that followed filled the surroundings with their mellifluous song.

I live in Miraj (16 50N 74 45 E), a small town in Sangli district in southern Maharashtra. This sighting of the fantail pair made me think on the possibility of observing birds in my garden. The word 'garden' is probably not appropriate in the strictest sense, because the vegetation that grows has no theme and no order. There are few ornamentals but a good number of the plants are wild and grow wherever they find a place. The boundaries are fenced by golden dewdrop, *Duranta plumieri*, on all the sides except the south. Roses, pink and fragrant, are in company with raktapushpa, *Asclepias curasavica*. Honeysuckle, *Lonicera spp*, and shwet-punarnava, *Boehravia rapanda*, are neighbours. The exquisite beauty of glory lily, *Gloriosa superba*, is short lived, whereas jasmine keeps the air fragrant all round the year. The ivy, *Ficus pumila*, covering the walls, gives the facade a quaint look and pyrostegia, *Bignonia venusta*, on the roof enhances the colour of tiles. The flowers of Rangoon creeper, *Quisqualis indica*, and queen of night, *Nyctanthes arbortristis*, emit a sweet scent after sundown. A lone Colville's glory, *Colvillea racemosa*, stands out in the northwest portion with its orange racemes and the blooming of Ashoka, *Saraca indica*, announces the arrival of *Vasant Ritu*. The medicinal plants, *Tylophora asthamatica*, a climber used in the treatment of asthma, and Sarpagandha, *Rauwolfia serpentina*, which helps people suffering from high blood pressure, have also found a place in my garden. No wonder, this cosmopolitan crowd of botanical specimens attract a variety of fauna.

The blooms of coral creeper, *Antigonon leptopus*, golden dewdrop, raktapushpa and Pride of Barbados, *Caesalpinia pulcherrima,* have enough nectar to tempt a variety of insects.

Spiders build their silken traps at strategic locations and wait patiently for the prey to get entangled. Dragonflies prefer to remain near the pond in the northeast corner and beehives are found in odd places. Green coloured beetles are seen crawling around and pinhead-sized insects hide in the whorl of rose petals.

The later part of monsoon is not cloudy always and sun peeps out now and then. A host of wild flowers bloom in the countryside and in the garden. A feast is provided for the Lepidoptera and more than a dozen butterflies are seen flying around going from flower to flower. The restless Tailed Jay, with quivering green wings, sometimes allows a very close approach at eye level while feeding. The Common Rose and Common Mormon prefer to remain at a slightly higher level, whereas the Small Grass Yellow clings to the tiny flowers of shwet punarnava. The Pioneer and Common Gull are seen often and Red Pierrot makes an occasional appearance and stands out amongst these winged beauties. I do not know where Evening Brown spends the day but at times I see it flying around in the living room after sundown.

It is not only butterflies, but the avian visitors also add colour to the greenery. The commonest bird seen is the house sparrow *(Passer domesticus)*. A flock of these, like old acquaintances, greets me almost every morning. They chase each other, take dust baths, feed on the scattered grains and chatter constantly during their waking hours. In many urban areas, the tall apartment buildings and altered habitat have made sparrows homeless. Their presence in my garden indicates that they still have a place where they can live and thrive.

The House crow (*Corvus splendens*) is, as expected, seen around but surprisingly its presence is not as frequent as the sparrows. May be the bird finds a greener pasture across the street? While crows declare their presence vociferously, a lone Crow pheasant (*Centropus sinensis*) silently moves for a few minutes in the morning hours in the garden and flies away. In the rural areas sighting of ‘Bharadwaj’ is considered a good omen and though not superstitious, I am delighted to see the bird with russet wings and ruby red eyes.

Sunbirds, purple, (*Nectarinia asiatica*), and purple-rumped, (*Nectarinia zeylonica*) are remarkable birds as far as their feeding style is concerned. The dainty bird will perch erect, horizontal or upside down to have its meal from a blossom. On one occasion I noticed a female purple-rumped sunbird bathing by brushing her wings against the drops of water clinging to the leaves of kunti (*Muraya exotica*).

The sunbird, white-eye (*Zosterops palpebrosa*) and black drongo (*Dicrurus adsimilis*) are attracted to the orange blooms of coral tree, (*Erythrina suberosa*), during spring. Around this time of the year, the male koel (*Eudynamys scolopacea*) begins calling before sunrise and its crescendo note surely disrupts sleep. The Crimson breasted barbet (*Megalaima haemacephala*) breeds in summer and its call is often heard in the garden but the sighting is difficult due to small size of the bird and the camouflage offered by green foliage. The Rose ringed parakeet (*Psittacula krameri*), Grey tit (*Parus major*) and Indian robin (*Saxicoloides fulicata*) are regular visitors as well.

Where ever flowers occur, there will be nectar. Where nectar flows, bees will arrive and where bees are found bee-eaters are not far away. Indeed, a pair or two of Small green bee-eaters (*Merops orientalis*) visit my garden for feeding. Sighting an insect, the bird takes off. Its delta shaped wings facilitate superb maneuvering in flight. Seizing the prey in mid-air the bird returns to the perch on outstretched wings and enjoys a well-earned meal.

The garden is not only a place of occasional visits, but a few of the feathered folk considered nesting there as well. Indian Myna (*Acridotheres tristis*) was the first to locate a space between the walls and roof and I notice that a brood is raised every year. Ashy prinia (*Prinia socialis*) selects large leaves and stitches these to form a pocket that is lined by soft material. When the eggs hatch, the parents are kept busy feeding the chicks. The Red-vented bulbul (*Pycnonotus cafer*) builds a nest in the tangle of vines and I have often noticed the parents accompanying the chicks as they learn to fly. Fantail flycatcher (*Rhipidura albicollis*) and Purple-rumped sunbird built a home only once so far and a pair of Ringed dove (*Streptopelia decaocto*) made several attempts in a season but did not succeed.

There have been some rare visitors as well. A shikra (*Accipiter badius*) was sighted on a couple of occasions and a golden oriole (*Oriolus oriolus*) just once. However, I was taken completely by surprise when I came across a White-breasted waterhen (*Amaurornis phoenicurus*) moving around one morning. The bird probably felt insecure as we confronted each other and it turn around, crossed the fence in a great hurry and disappeared from sight within seconds. My garden is too small a place for a Black kite (*Milvus migrans*) but sometimes one perches on the electricity pole just outside the compound and keeps looking-out for a snack. How often it succeeds, I do not know, but considering the infrequent visits, the success rate seems to be low.

The avifauna of Sangli district is rich and varied. In all 252 species of birds are recorded in this part of the state, out of which 82 are water-birds and 22 have made the wastelands and grasslands their home. The tally of forest birds is 28, majority of these living in the wilderness area of Chandoli in the Western Ghat.

Mr. Sharad Apte* and Dr. Vinod Bhagwat, both avid birdwatchers from Sangli-Miraj, have sighted 12 species of raptors in the district, including 4 migratory varieties.

Sagareshwar sanctuary near Kirloskarwadi is a home for 114 avian species and 28 of these are migrants.

The birds sighted in my garden are but a small fraction of the avifauna in Sangli district. Nevertheless, they make their presence felt every now and then probably because the tiny habitat is suitable for their sustenance. Nectar laden flowers provide food for insects. Birds find a variety of morsels scattered around and the small pond in the garden is an ideal place to quench the thirst and for a bath when it overflows. Perching and nesting sites offer safety and the parents can take care of the brood easily. All these factors contribute for the year round presence of one or the other species offering an opportunity to observe them at home.

The seasons come and go. The flora in the garden has a different look every few weeks. It is overflowing lush green in monsoon. Summer is usually dry but Ashoka and coral tree are in bloom. Children come to pluck flowers and cry with ecstasy when butterflies flutter around them. Friends arrive unannounced on a winter morning and insist that breakfast and tea be served on the sit-out, feeling the gentle rays of sun filtering through the foliage. The surroundings have not only given us happiness but others enjoy the ambience as well. We thank the Almighty for His gifts and have immense pleasure in sharing these with bees, butterflies, birds and brethren who love wildlife.

** Mr. Sharad Apte is working on the checklist of birds in Sangli district. He has recorded the calls of several species of birds and has prepared an audio cassette titled ‘Gaa VihaAgano’, that translates as ‘Sing, O Birds’.*

CORRESPONDENCE

ROBBING OF EGGS BY FEMALE KOEL, FROM THE NEST OF RED-WHISKERED BULBUL (Pycnonotus jocosus), AT DHARWAD.

Dr. J.C. UTTANGI, 15, Mission Compound, Dharwad-580 001.

In the backyard of our house at Mission Compound, Dharwad, an Ashoka tree (*Saraca indica* var. *pendula*) has grown tall reaching a height of nearly 18 feet. Close to this tree, there are two other trees – a mango and a chikku with dense foliage. They provide shelter and shade to a variety of bird species like, red-vented bulbul, common myna, iora and occasionally coucal, crow and koels, during noon. The calls of male koels and their aerial frolicsome pursuits increase with the dawn of spring. However, the female koels habitually cautious, remain quiet in the dark shade of the foliage but are very watchful. A number of T.V. cable wires criss cross in the backyard. On one such wire, passing close to the Ashoka tree, two members of Red-Whiskered Bulbul, *Pycnonotus jocosus*, were observed perched at 8.30 in the morning on 16th March 2003. To our kitchen door facing the back yard, a framework of iron mesh has been fixed. This gives an easy peep into the back yard garden. One of the bulbuls perched on the wire was holding a small twig. This indicated its intentions. A nest was being built in the Ashoka tree, at a height, approximately 8 feet from the ground. The cup-like nest made up of grass, dry leaves and cobweb was almost complete on the 16th March. There were no eggs. On the 17th. March, an egg in the nest was detected at about 9.30 in the morning. The two bulbuls perched outside on the wire, were engaged in preening their feathers. At about 10.30 a.m. they were not to be seen. The incubating member that had returned around 11 a.m. was sitting on the egg. It was left undisturbed. After lunch at 1.30 p.m., we had moved on to the drawing room. Our eldest daughter, who is a bit interested in bird watching, out of curiosity, had turned her attention on the tree where the nest of the bulbuls was located. Suddenly, at around 4.00 p.m. she saw a large spotted bird entering into the foliage of the Ashoka tree. As she made some vocal sounds we all moved towards the kitchen door. It was a female koel. The drooping branches of Ashoka tree had arrested the intruder bird from moving away. It was struggling and come out. It disclosed its identity as it quickly disappeared into the nearby chikku tree. A quick examination of the nest produced the expected results. The single egg laid by the bulbul had been robbed by the koel leaving the nest empty. Following this tragedy, the two bulbuls that had returned around 5 p.m. in the evening, suspecting the intruder to be hiding somewhere in the chikku tree, became wildly excited and showed uncontrolled fury by conducting attacking flights towards the chikku tree. Thereafter they disappeared but, returned again in the morning on the 18th March 2003. Their visits continued for 2-3 days but, they never returned after the 22nd of March 2003. The nest is still kept intact for further pursuits.

Discussion:-

The two bird species involved in the present Egg-robbing case, were, (1) the Robber (predator) — the Brood Parasitic Female Indian Koel (*Eudynamys scolopacea*) and the other (2) the Robbed (prey) the Frenzied Red-whiskered Bulbul (*Pycnonotus jocosus*). The former species namely the female koel, habitually cautious, remains quiet in its hide, in the dark corners of a shady and dense growth of tree foliage in almost the same way the spotted owlet and other members of the owl group do. This habit of living in the dark has enabled such birds in developing special hearing mechanism so that they can hear better to catch certain peculiar sounds, calls, bustles, frenzy, fussy and other similar sputtering and bubbling behaviour of the Red-whiskered Bulbul. Salim Ali and Ripley (1987) state (page 412/78) that, by the "peculiar fussy last-minute departure of the incubating bird, the position of the nest is usually betrayed." Further, they add that "the nest is left unattended through long periods of the day and also during night until full clutch has been laid". This exactly is the reason why the watchful female koel, (a master in filching eggs from nests of other smaller birds) has been able to achieve success in detecting brooder nests especially, that of the Red-whiskered Bulbul, whenever an opportunity such as this happened. Moreover, the female koel itself being chiefly a fruit eater, in order to compensate the low calorific value of the fruits often needs and desires to have change in diet and it would not hesitate to go for a wide variety of plant material, insects and small invertebrates and for this its bill is well suited to have all such omnivorous diet including eggs of small birds that will provide the needed protein and calcium in the diet to help the female koel to produce later in June, healthy eggs to be laid in the nest of the foster crow. Another reason which also seems to be a more probable reason for the bulbuls to fall victim to the swindler female koel's attack is the height of the nest site - a tall Ashoka tree which enabled the predator to have an easy access to the nest. Usually a lower level site of 3-4 feet high bush is preferred by this species of bulbul.

RARE SIGHTING OF ORIENTAL TURTLE DOVE (Streptopelia orientalis) IN KERALA.

JIJO MATHEW, Pappalil (House), Keerampara (P.O), Kothamangalam, Ernakulam, Kerala - 686 691.

The Western Ghat is very rich in birdlife. About 28% of the subcontinent's birds have been recorded from this region, of which a number of them are winter visitors. They arrive here in the month of Sep-Oct and return within March-April. There are some passage migrants and stragglers too. Out of the subcontinent's 141 endemic species, 16 of them belong to Western Ghats. Some species are gradually migrating to high and low areas and remarkably adapting themselves to the changing conditions.

On 17th April 1999, at about 08.30 hrs., while watching a flock of spotted doves *(Streptopelia chinensis)* perched on an electric line over a paddy field near my residence, a bird was observed similar to spotted dove but with black and bluish grey barrings on either side of the neck; rufous scapularies and wing coverts; brownish grey to dusky maroon pink underparts; orange iris, horny brown bill; magenta tarsus and pure white undertail coverts. It was lacking most of its tail feathers. The bird was new to me so, I noted all its identifying features and rushed to my house to confirm it. I referred to Birds of the Indian Subcontinent and identified the bird as Oriental turtle dove (*Streptopelia orientalis meena*). As per the book, only two individual sightings were recorded from the state so far. (The peninsular race *(Streptopelia orientalis erythrocephala)* has much rufous crown, neck and mantle).

The same evening, at around 16:00 hrs. I re-visited the place equipped with a camera. The dove was feeding on weed seeds on the ground, with a flock of birds. I got very close to the bird and took some good shots, which enabled me to have a sighting proof. It was surprising that the bird was not shy unlike other dove species seen here. It was seen till 24-12-1999. The bird is supposed to be a straggler to the region.

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BIRDS IN MUTUAL RELATIONSHIPS.

A.K. CHAKRAVARTHY, Chief Scientific Officer (Entomology), ZARS, VC Farm, Mandya – 571 405.

Animals engage in relationships with plants, man or other animals in which one of the species benefits; the other may also and in any case, none suffers negative effects. Such relationships may be commensalism (man and monkey) or mutualism (fig and wasp). However, in practice, the difference between commensalism and mutualism narrows down. While I was in Antharasanthe range of the Nagarhole National Park between 6th and 8th December 2003, birds were found interacting in diverse polyspecies associations.

Nagarahole, popularly also known as the Rajiv Gandhi National Park (11°45'N, 76°5'E – 12°15'N, 76°25'E) is flanked by Karnataka's Bandipur National Park to its southeast and Kerala's Wynaad Wildlife Sanctuary to its southwest. These three protected areas together with Tamilnadu's Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary and Kerala's Silent Valley National Park constitute the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, which is the best remaining stretch of evergreen tropical habitat in the subcontinent.

At Antharasanthe, troops of langurs (*Semnopithecus entellus*) in the top portions of the tree canopy were found nipping the tender sprigs of foliage. Langurs consumed only a bit, dropping the rest of the whole branch to the ground. Herds of spotted deers (*Axis axis*) get attracted to these branches under the tree canopy. Soon common mynas (*Acridotheres tristis*) flock in to join the grazing deers, flying and hopping sideways to seize the flushed out insects disturbed by the deers' movements through the grass.

Alongside the Kabini river stream in Antharasanthe are extensive grasslands which along with the mountain ranges provide perennial grazing grounds and an undisturbed landscape for herds of black beauties, the elephants and the wild gaurs - the flagship species. The elephant (*Elephas maximus*) and the Indian Bison (*Bos gaurus*) were found foraging and tending their babies. Elephants explored the grass cover by swaying the tip of their trunks back and forth, used them as shovels and uprooted clumps of the nut grass, *(Cyperus rotundus)*. The insects and other ground dwelling creatures flying out as a result of the movement of elephants, were promptly attended by the cattle egrets, *(Bubulcus ibis)*. One or two egrets would walk briskly or run to keep up with the advancing pachyderms. So did the black drongo *(Dicrurus adsimilis)* perching on the wild gaurs, singly. A drongo was observed swooping to the ground to pick up insects and other soil dwelling anthropods emerging out of the grassland. Dried and drying dung pads of elephant and the wild gaurs abound with copriphagous (dung feeding) creatures. A number of birds were found exploiting this resource.

One of the striking features of the ground vegetation in the Antharasanthe forest, was upland spots (humps) made of loose soil. The activities of honeybees, rootgrubs, beetles and termites in these spots proved attractive to a variety of animals. Sloth bears (*Melursus ursinus)* visited the spots in search of honey and insectivorous birds like Indian roller (*Coracias benghalensis)* Hoopoe (*Upupa epops*), Magpie robin (*Copsychus saularis*), White-breasted kingfisher *(Halcyon smyrnensis*) and the drongo, were also observed feeding on insects.

In North America, Yellow–bellied sapsuckers (*Sphyrapicus varius*) drill holes on tree trunks which exude large amounts of tree sap attracting a variety of animals. Hummingbirds are one of them. Hummingbirds especially frequent these drillings because tree sap is similar to floral nectar in its chemical composition. By exploiting sapsucker drillings, hummingbirds get energy and occupy areas where sapsuckers occur (see, Weins, 1990). These relationships revealed habitat use patterns and the ways the animal communities shared the resources to co-exist. Dr. P.K. Ananda Rao and Dr. Prakash wondered, how in the present day human communities, humans are co-existing, whether relationships are building-up or breaking down?

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LAUGHING DOVE NEST PREDATED BY BLUE ROCK PIGEON

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Doves build their nests in a casual manner, with scanty nesting material. In the absence of suitable nesting sites, doves resort to building nests even in odd places. On 15th April 2003, in the afternoon, I saw a laughing dove sitting on the edge of my office window between the open chick-door and the edge of wall, some 5 feet away from my chair. The dove was apparently sitting on the nest with very few nesting materials. Through the transparent glass I could observe the dove, without disturbing it. Its partner continously brought the nesting material for the next two days. On 18th morning at 9.30 hrs, I saw the female dove sitting on her two eggs. The dove did not fly out, even when I opened the window and took a photograph of the bird at nest. The female was incubating her eggs for the entire day and did not move till 18.30hrs, when I left my office. The male was seen incubating on the next day at 9.30 hrs and at around 10.10 hrs the female took over the incubation task and was at nest till at 12.45 hrs. The pair took turns to incubate the eggs for the next three days. During this phase, the eggs were not kept unattended except for 1-2 minutes during the change overs. On 21st morning the nest was unattended between10.15 and 11.00hrs. Then again the nest was unatteneded between 16.45 and 17.20 hrs. The eggs remained unattended for nearly 80 minutes. For the next 9 days the partners incubated the eggs by rotation and the nest was often left unattended for periods that ranged upto 92 minutes (n=9) (with 60 to 120 maximum minutes).

On 23rd April, the female dove was attacked and wounded badly by a blue rock pigeon at 11.15 hrs and it was seen bleeding in the head. Despite the attack the dove remained with the eggs and did not leave the nest. The pigeon arrived again and attacked the dove at nest at about 9.50 hrs on 27th April. The attack lasted some 15-20 minutes. On 29th the pigeon reappeared at 17.40 hrs and viciously attacked the dove and the nest containing the eggs for about 25 minutes and pulled out the nesting materials, and dislodged an egg from the nest. On the next day, (30th April) when I arrived at the office at 9.45 hrs and looked at the nest in the window, there was nothing, except for a few scattered sticks of neem and a few aluminum and iron wires.

After 30 minutes I saw the male pigeon dancing, circling, and bowing its head up and down near the window. It was probably announcing to its mate that the dove nest-takeover was complete and that the coast was clear for the pigeons to build a nest of their own. There are several reports of attack on the nest due to intra and inter species rivalry. But this unusual event of predation of a doves' nest by a blue rock pigeon and nest take-over bid is worth reporting.

OCCURRENCE OF THE RUSTY-TAILED FLYCATCHER (Muscicapa ruficauda) IN THE MIDDLE OF THE WOODS.

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A solitary flycatcher slightly larger than well known and distributed Asian Brown Flycatcher (*Muscicapa dauurica*) descended from a tree of c.10m height to a bush of c. 2 m. Moving lightly and quickly among bushes foraging insects, it landed twice on pebbles abutting almost dried up stream bed. Its rusty tail, paler brown upper body, lower throat and breast greyish, lower mandible more yellowish were distinctive enough to identify it as a Rusty-tailed flycatcher (*Muscicapa ruficauda*).

The flycatcher was observed at a place known as Bibikan at an elevation of 1650 m above msl, midway between Sanake and Anshi situated in Anshi National Park, Karnataka. Glimpse of its activity was noted for 20 minutes from 1310 hrs on 21st January, 2004. The vegetation cover is moist deciduous.

During winter the flycatcher frequents evergreen forest especially along the margins, tracks and in clearings. It doesn't seem to penetrate far into woods (Ali & Ripley, 1987). The flycatcher was sighted actively foraging in the middle of the forest at least 4-5 km away from the forest margin. As there has been no previous record of this bird active deep in the forest, present observation obviously establishes its presence.

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CANNIBALISM OBSERVED IN RUFOUS TREEPIE (Dendrocitta vagabunda).

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Rufous treepie, *(Dendrocitta vagabunda)* is the most common and widespread treepie species (Kazmierczak, 2000). It was recorded throughout the Kumbhalgarh Wildlife Sanctuary (KWS) in the Aravalli Hills (Chhangani, 2002). Recently, rufous treepie is also recorded in the arid Thar Desert of Rajasthan (Islam et al., 2001). It feeds on insects, lizards, small birds, eggs, fruits, flowers, nectar and kitchen waste in some area (Ali & Ripley, 1983; Grewal, 1995).

I was crossing the Kumbhalgarh Wildlife Sanctuary (KWS) on 29th November 2003 at 11.30, from Ranakpur road by car. Near the Malgarh Choki, I saw one treepie feeding on a dead bird on the road which was probably killed by a passing vehicle. Birds, mammals and reptiles are the common road kills in Kumbhalgarh Wildlife Sanctuary (KWS) of which 49% are birds (Chhangani, 2004). With the help of a binoculars (10 x 50), I identified the carcass as that of a rufous treepie. The treepie kept on feeding the carcass for the next 3-4 minutes, till a passing jeep disturbed it. After the bird flew off, I went close to carcass and confirmed that it as a rufous treepie.

Feeding on the dead of its own kind in many predatory and scavenger birds have been observed in barn owls, *Tyto alba*; short-eared owl, *Asio flammeus*; Oriental honey buzzards, *Pernis ptilorhynchus*; White backed vulture, *Gyps bengalensis* and some sea birds (Rana & Prakash, 2003).

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WATER BIRD CENSUS CONDUCTED IN THE TANKS OF NORTH BANGALORE (2004).

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Introduction:

Wetlands are lands transitional between terrestrial and aquatic systems where the water table is usually at or near the surface, or the land is covered by shallow water. Though in the past these areas were considered unproductive and unhealthy "wastelands", over the past two decades there has been a growing awareness of their value. Wetlands are not only a source of food and fuel to the numerous communities dependent on them for subsistence but are also of immense importance. Urban wetlands through the ages have been the lifeline of most cities in India. They were preserved and looked after by the people as their main source of water supply for drinking and irrigation. These wetlands are found all over the country and are either natural or built by people. Over the years, they have gradually depleted, leading to a number of problems in urban areas such as flooding, water scarcity and water logging.

Every year annual waterfowl count is conducted between 5th and 26th of January to understand the bird migration, number of birds, changes in the arrival of bird species and the tank condition. This would give a broad picture on the current condition of the tanks and the dependent birds. Our Bangalore based organisation - ***Green Cross***, conducted the annual water bird count in many tanks, in North Bangalore during January 2004. For the Waterfowl Census we set out quite early, as the birds are active during the early hours of the day. About 11 tanks were surveyed, for documenting tank condition, other activities in the tank region and the different species of birds along with their numbers were recorded. The condition of the tanks was very bad and only 4 tanks were having some amount of water, whereas the remaining were totally dry with vehicles moving in and out of the tank region, taking short cuts and raising heavy dust in the process. In some places, cowherds were busy grazing their cattle on the dry grasses and small plants, in and around the tanks and the marginal lands.

Summary:

Puttenahalli kere housed a lot of winged visitors including Painted Storks (*Mycteria leucocephala*), Open-billed Storks (Anastomus *oscitans*) and a few Spot -billed Pelicans (*Pelecanus philippensis*) in addition to many waterbirds. Despite being a drought year, this lake was holding water, thanks to the efforts of Lake Development Authority in taking a few steps to conserve water in this lake. Nagavara Tank which was earlier dry was holding water, because the tank was desilted, and attracted many water birds. In the previous year (Jan-2003), Madhure Kere had about 190 Painted Storks and other birds such as Spoonbills (*Platalea leucorodia*), White Ibises (*Threskiornis melanocephalus*), Grey Herons (*Ardea cinerea*), Black-winged Stilts (*Himantopus himantopus*), Sandpipers, River Terns (*Sterna aurantia*), Pintailed Ducks (*Anas acuta*), Spot-billed Ducks (Anas *poecilorhyncha*) and others. This year it was bone dry. It was depressing to note that there were no egrets or pond herons. On the other hand, Hebbal Tank was as usual rich with a number of Pintailed Ducks, Spot-billed Ducks, Common Pochards (*Aythya ferina*), Garganey Teals (*Anas querquedula*), Sandpipers, Black-winged Stilts, River Terns, Grey Herons, Purple Herons (*Ardea purpurea*) etc. Interestingly, Jakkur Tank had Grey Herons, Spot-billed Ducks, Pintailed Ducks, Common Pochards, Egrets, etc. The last tank to be surveyed was the Hesaraghatta Tank, which was having good amount of water last year, housing a number of birds, but was completely dry this year. The locals said that the lake was totally dry for the first time in several years. Last year we could observe huge flocks of White-necked Storks (*Ciconia episcopus*), and Painted Storks. In addition, Grey Herons and other waterfowl were present in good numbers.

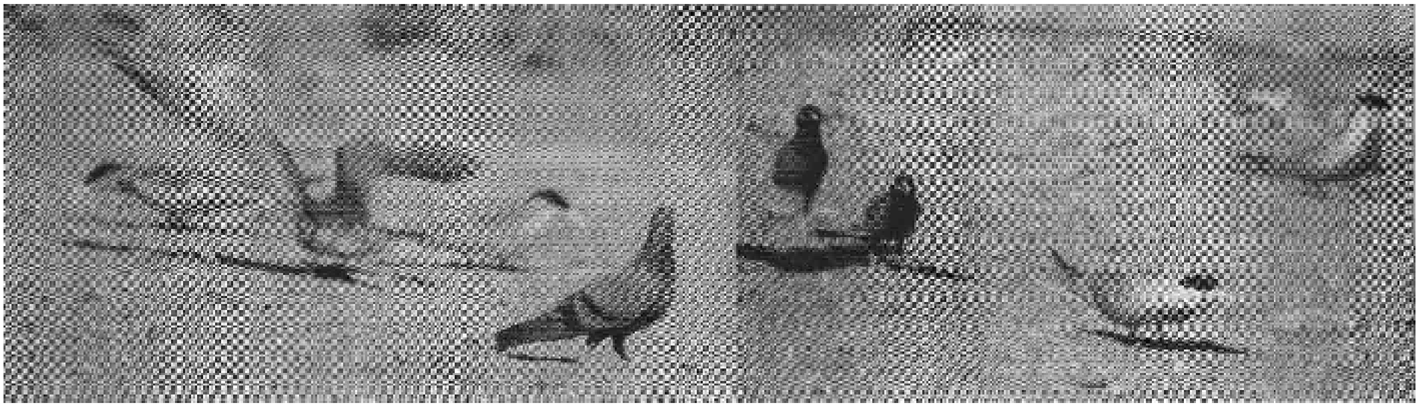
The monsoon this year is more promising with many of the tanks receiving good rains and some are already filled with water. We expect better count results during the January 2005 Waterfowl Census.

UNUSUAL FEEDING BEHAVIOUR OF RIVER TERNS (Sterna aurantia).

DHAIVAT HATHI, RAJDEEP JHALA AND BHAVESH TRIVEDI, "Shree", 42, Malaviya Nagar, Gondal Road, Rajkot., Ph. 0281-2388844, 9824209373

On 13th April 2004, we visited the Aji-1 Dam located near Rajkot for Birdwatching. A zoo and a garden are located adjacent to the dam. As a ritual practice, lots of people come here every day to scatter grains at a specified area, grams and 'Ganthia' (a fried item made from gram flour) for the pigeons. Many other birds such as House crow, House sparrow, Baya weaver, Indian myna, Bank myna, Ringed dove, Little brown dove arrive to feed on the grains, customarily offered to the pigeons. Even Black drongos frequent the grain scattering area in search of grains. To our surprise three common Indian mongoose were also seen feeding on the grains along the periphery.

As we were watching the ritual feeding of birds, at about 9.00 a.m. we saw nearly 50 river terns flying over this area and settling down to pickup the grams and 'Ganthia' and probably consumed the grains in the same way as they catch fish from water. Some terns sat-down on the ground with the other birds for feeding. Again we visited the grain scattering area on 21st April, 2004 and observed the same 'unnatural' behaviour of river terns. (*See photos below*). The staple food of Tern is fish, so how can it ever digest vegetarian food. Red-wattled lapwings, Ruff and Reeve (during winter) are also noticed competing for food along with the terns and drongoes. Is this some sort of an adaptation?



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Cover: **Purple Moorhen** (*Porphyrio porphyrio*) is a beautiful bluish-purple rail, awash with turquoise on the neck and breast. Its long red legs and toes give it a light unpretentious gait as it stalks through the marshy-reed beds or wades through floating vegetation. The moorhen pulls-out fresh vegetable matter with its stout red beak and uses its long nimble toes to adjust and savour the succulent segments.

Photo S. Shreyas.